“The Extraordinary Call”

Genesis 12:1-9

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A little girl named Ruby embarked on an extraordinary journey, but at the time she had no idea just how extraordinary it was. At 6 years old, she began first grade, just like every other child her age. But rather than a first day of school filled with excitement and joy, hers was filled with anxiety and protests.

Ruby Bridges was the first black student to enroll at William Frantz Public School in New Orleans, Louisiana. The year was 1960, a full 6 years after segregated schools were deemed unconstitutional. The federal court was finally forcing schools to desegregate. Ruby and her fellow students at her all black kindergarten were given an exam to see who would attend a previously all white school. She passed and was given the opportunity to make history. 5 other students were selected, 2 chose not to go and 3 were sent to another school. Ruby would be the only black child at her school.

Her first year of school was anything but typical. For months little Ruby had to be escorted by federal marshals, 2 in front of her and 2 behind her. This was to protect her from the angry protesters who camped outside of her school each day. White families removed their children from the school, refusing to put their children in the same classroom as Ruby. The teachers refused to teach her. For her first day, she had to sit in the principles office until they could find a teacher for her. The next day, Mrs. Henry arrived from Boston. This compassionate teacher joyfully agreed to teach Ruby, and they spent the year together. Secluded from the rest of the school.

By the time spring rolled around, the protesters left and the U.S marshals were no longer needed to escort Ruby. School let out for the summer and Ruby anticipated another year just like her first. But her second grade experience was quite different. Ms. Nelson was not invited to teach at William Franz for a second year, so she moved back to Boston. More families enrolled their children in the school – white and black alike. Ruby was able to experience a more normal school year.

Her memory of that first year with the protesters and the anger directed at her faded. She soon forgot about that unique year. As an adult, Ruby Bridges Hall said that she didn’t think about that year until about 30 years when she returned to William Franz Elementary where her nieces attended. A flood of memories came back to her. A reporter found her and did a story about her. Since then her story has been honored as a crucial moment in the history of our nation.

What I love most about her story, is that 6 year old Ruby had no idea how extraordinary her journey was. For her, she was attending school just like any other child her age. She knew her situation was unusual, but she didn’t know she was shaping history.

I think Abram has this in common with Ruby Bridges. He was on an extraordinary journey, but at the time he had no idea how his story would make history.

Some readers interpret Abrams call story as a major upheaval in his life. That he’s told to go to a foreign land and leave his old life behind. Completely uproot what he knows to be familiar. But if we look back at chapter 11, we’re told that Abram’s father, Terah was already moving their family to Canaan. It was already in the works, it wasn’t a major upheaval. Terah was very old and frail. He died halfway through the trip, and it is possible the family was just going to stay where they were. But then God showed up and gave instructions to Abram. Keep going, God said. Continue on your way to Canaan, because great things await you there.

Like Ruby Bridges, Abram had no idea how extraordinary this journey would be. For him, a 75 year old man, he was just heading to Canaan, a land his father felt would be a good place to settle the family. There was nothing special about the destination. And there was nothing particularly special about Abram. We don’t get the details on why God chose him. He was just an average guy, trying to provide for his family. He must have been living comfortably, since he had servants. It doesn’t appear that he was in want of anything. We know his wife Sarai was barren, but there’s no mention of this being a major crisis in their family. They were just living their lives as best they knew how. At the time Abram had no idea what was in store for him.

 When God shows up to call Abram, Abram and his family were just going about their ordinary lives. God doesn’t ask Abram to do anything extraordinary, really. God simply says, keep going on your journey. I promise to journey with you and along the way I’m going to bless you. I’m going to make your name great so that you’ll be a blessing unto others. You will be the father of all nations.

Surprisingly Abram doesn’t ask questions. He doesn’t protest and say he’s not up for the task. He simply accepts this call from God and trusts that God will take care of him and his family. He packs up his things and his family and they continue on their journey. Not knowing what the future would hold, but trusting that God was with them.

This seems to be the way things go for us most of the time. We live our relatively ordinary lives. Going about each day just living life as usual. Most days are not filled with dramatic happenings, unless you’re a cast member of a reality TV show. In that case, everything is filled with drama. But for most of us, we live average lives. Nothing unusual, not out of the ordinary.

In the midst of all of this ordinary, we forget that God has called us to an extraordinary journey, just like Abram. This call doesn’t necessarily have to be epic tale. One that makes the history books. But to be called by God to be a faithful people, means we are called to an extraordinary journey. One that means taking risks. One that means putting our trust in God and letting go of control.

This past Wednesday, a group of us met to start discussing The Sailboat Church, a book by Joan Gray. The first chapter alone gave much food for thought as we were presented with the idea of the church being like a sailboat. This means putting up the sails and trusting that Holy Spirit will guide the boat and provide the power to move us along. Our discussion on this was centered on how we do that as a church, but we also talked about how we do that as individuals. We are called, in our everyday lives, put up those sails and trust that God will guide us. This act of faith sets us on a very extraordinary journey.

As we see in Abram’s call story, God calls ordinary people to bless them, but more importantly to be a blessing to others. We are called to this special task, as ordinary people, to live a life of faith, so that others may be blessed through us. God works in this remarkable way all of the time. Using ordinary people and situations to make extraordinary things happen.

There’s no greater example of this, than the story of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. God didn’t choose to enter this world in some dramatic way. God chose to enter this world through an ordinary baby, born to ordinary parents. Jesus lived a relatively average life, until his cousin John the Baptist revealed to others just how extraordinary he is. And even then, the Prince of Peace didn’t take up residence in a palace. He didn’t assume his place on a throne. He wandered the land, teaching people. Having conversations with them. Eating dinner with other ordinary people.

We might think that our lives are boring or uneventful. We might think we’ve treaded lightly on the world and not made much of an impact. But God has this way of using our rather ordinary lives to bless others. Even the minutest interactions with others can leave a lasting impact. The scope of how much God blesses others through us is often beyond our awareness. Most often we have no idea how much we are impacting others. We don’t always see what God is doing in the midst of our everyday lives.

Abram sure didn’t realize it. He was just going on a journey to settle in a new land. God showed up and promised big things. Abram had no idea what that would mean. That he would become the father of all nations. That God’s covenant with humanity would start with this one, ordinary man.

Ruby Bridges didn’t realize it. She had no idea she would make such an impact on history. For her, she was just going to school, doing her best to learn just like every other kid. She had no idea that her courage to walk into that school amidst the protesters would make that walk easier for all black children in our nation.

Ordinary people, ordinary situations. Through these means, God tends to work in extraordinary ways.